

Successful Women in Region 3

Region 3
Federal Women's Program

Contact
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"March is National Women's History Month"

The 2005, Women's History Month theme, "Women Change America," honors and recognizes the role of American women in transforming culture, history and politics as leaders, writers, scientists, educators, politicians, artists, historians, and informed citizens. In the weeks to come, we will recognize several women who are leaders in Region 3.



An interview with Mary Knapp, Ph.D.

Reynoldsburg Ecological Services Field Supervisor

What is your educational background and how did your education help you to get where you are today?

I received a Bachelor's degree in Biology with a minor in Chemistry from Pittsburg State University (Kansas) in 1970; a Master's degree in Zoology – Fisheries Management from Oklahoma State University in 1985; and, a Ph.D. in Fisheries – Watershed Management and Rural Sociology from Auburn in 1994. I took my education in spells – working for years between my bachelors and masters and then again between my masters and Ph.D. I think that has worked out well for me. I feel that coming out of grad school, after having been in the work force previously, offers the unique advantage of being able to bring to your work the most current and most rigorous science available in your discipline.

I think my education has helped me to understand the integration between the natural and social sciences, which was the basis for my doctoral research. Understanding fish and wildlife issues is one thing, understanding how people value those resources and can be persuaded to join the dialog is something entirely different. I believe that integrative focus is one thing we probably need more emphasis on in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Another very important aspect of my education is that it allowed me to participate in the SCEP program (used to be called the COOP Program). I feel very fortunate to have been part of that program – it offered me a start in the Service. I have seen many others who have been part of the program and who are now very positive success stories. We have three SCEP students or former SCEP students in our office right now!

What course or path did you take to become the Project Leader at the Reynoldsburg, Ohio Ecological Services Field Office?

When I was a beginning biologist, I wanted to work out in the field most of the time. I still enjoy that part of the job, but I realized eventually that field workers are not necessarily the people who are the decision makers. And to effect change, I felt it was appropriate to take on the role of decision maker/project leader in order to do the most for the resource. I believe you learn the job as a staff biologist and then you learn how not to make mistakes as you watch your boss. Then once you have that foundation, it's only natural to want to lead your program in the way you think is most appropriate.

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How did you become a Project Leader?

Right before being Project Leader in the Reynoldsburg office I was the Deputy Project Leader in the Arcata California Ecological Services Field Office. I was fortunate because the Project Leader there let me have full rein with most all the programs, so I learned a lot and had to learn it quickly. Arcata is in the R1/CNO Region and there are some big timber/spotted owl/marbled murrelet issues there and a very active conservation community. There were between 45 and 65 staff in the Arcata office, given the season, so I had a lot on my plate between issues and people (that's another reason it's important to know people AND biology!)



"These are 'my people' - the Reynoldsburg Ecological Services team - and I'm so proud of them, this picture best represents my work (which is my people) and where I'm at today."

How long have you been in Federal Service?

Altogether, I have more than 20 years of service with the government at 3 agencies. I began my career with the Corps of Engineers as a temporary Park Technician on Hulah Lake in Oklahoma. Then when I got my masters, I entered the FWS as a COOP student and then was converted to a biologist in the Corpus Christi (Texas) ES Field Office in Region 2. After being on the Texas coast for about 5 years, I wanted to work on western fish so I transferred over to the Forest Service and was a Forest Fisheries biologist on the Santa Fe National Forest (Santa Fe, NM) and the Carson National Forest (Taos, NM) for about 4 years. I took a leave without pay, for several years, to earn my Ph.D. at Auburn. After that, I went back into the Forest Service, in their Washington, D.C. headquarters office, as the National Endangered Fisheries Program Lead for about 4 years. One of the best experiences I had while working in D.C. was that I was selected to be a Brookings Fellow in 1997. I worked on Capitol Hill for a year on water management and diversion issues on the upper Missouri River in Senator Kent Conrad's office. That experience on the Hill was just invaluable. Having had experience with those three agencies, I knew that the Fish and Wildlife Service was the agency where I belonged. So I "came back" to the Service in 1998, when I returned to the Arcata California ES Field Office in R1/CNO. I was the Deputy Project Leader for 4 years, before coming to the Reynoldsburg ES Office as Project Leader. I also had 12 years of experience as a laboratory technician in the private sector before I became a biologist. If you do the math, I think that makes me officially old.

Did you have a mentor? How did you find him/her?

I don't really believe that I ever had a mentor per se; but there was one person who was very influential in my career and that was Dr. Gene Maughan. He was the Leader of the Cooperative Fisheries Research Unit at Oklahoma State University. It was under his leadership that I learned fisheries management and about the need to strive for professionalism and excellence in everything we do. He was also responsible for nominating me for the Coop Student program.

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What was your biggest hurdle during your career?

Just getting started as a biologist was the biggest hurdle for me. I graduated from college with my Bachelor's degree in December of 1970 and it was a different world for women in natural resources back then. I wanted to be a fisheries biologist and I applied with state agencies (not really knowing about the Service at that time). One of the state agencies (I won't say which one) who replied to my inquiry told me that women in that state work as secretaries, not as biologists. I think that sort of attitude was a little extreme even back then, but it's a good example of what the environment was like for women trying to break into the field of natural resources. When I wasn't able to get a job as a biologist, I put my Chemistry minor to good use and worked as a lab tech in private industry for 12 years. Even after all that time, I still hadn't given up on being a fisheries biologist, so I went back and got my master's and was able to enter the Service as a COOP student in 1985. Things were much different by the time I finally became a biologist and there's been even more progress since then. I think women who are biologists in the Service today take it pretty much for granted that whether or not they are hired and move up depends on many things, but gender has little or nothing to do with their success; and that is really a good thing.

Are you looking to take your career to the next level? Where do you see yourself in the next 5 or 10 years?

I think everyone is looking to take their career to the next level. For me, I am still figuring what that level is and where it is. I am very interested in international work, having spent most of my high school years in Chile and I would like to start by getting some international experience in the form of details to countries that might need natural resource expertise. As far as my position right now, I have only been in the Reynoldsburg office a little over three years, and it has gone really fast. There is a lot of work that needs to be accomplished and I would like to see these things come to fruition - that would give me a lot of satisfaction. This kind of work usually does not happen over night.

What are your interests outside of work?

Not surprisingly I love to travel – and I do a lot of it since I have a far flung family. My father lives in Phoenix and I have two grown daughters – Julie who is single and lives and works in Kansas City and Terra who is married and is in graduate school in Los Angeles. Both of my daughters are artists – figure that one out! My passionate hobby is family history. I have been working on my genealogy now for many years with some success – no horse thieves yet but some really interesting characters nonetheless.

If you have one piece of advice for women entering the natural resources field today, what would it be?

The women in natural resources I know are doing just fine – they don't need my advice; however, if I were to tell them one thing, it would be to never lose their passion for the resources. That's what it's all about.